



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Iron in Your Diet

This information describes how to take in the amount of iron your body needs to stay healthy.

Iron is an essential mineral that your body needs to create red blood cells. Red blood cells store and carry oxygen throughout your body. Iron is also part of many proteins and enzymes that help you stay healthy.

Your Daily Intake of Iron

The National Academy of Sciences recommends certain amounts of iron based on your age and sex. You can see these recommendations in the “Recommended Daily Iron Intake” table. Iron is measured in milligrams (mg).

Recommended Daily Iron Intake		
Age	Males	Females
7 to 12 months	11 mg	11 mg
1 to 3 years	7 mg	7 mg
4 to 8 years	10 mg	10 mg
9 to 13 years	8 mg	8 mg
14 to 18 years	11 mg	15 mg
19 to 50 years	8 mg	18 mg

Iron Deficiency Anemia

If your body isn't getting enough iron, you can develop iron deficiency anemia. This can happen if you:

- Don't have enough iron in your diet.
- Have had chemotherapy or radiation therapy.
- Have a chronic illness.
- Have lost some of your blood, such as during surgery or an accident.

Iron supplements

If your iron level is low, your healthcare provider may prescribe an iron supplement to get your iron level to return to normal quickly. The amount of iron your healthcare provider recommends may be higher than what you see in the "Recommended Daily Iron Intake" table.

Taking higher amounts of iron can cause stomach irritation and constipation (having fewer bowel movements than usual). Tell your healthcare provider if you have these or any other problems while you're taking iron. Don't take iron supplements without checking with your healthcare provider.

Reading Food Labels

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 2/3 cup (55g) Servings Per Container About 8	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 230	Calories from Fat 72
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	12%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	12%
Dietary Fiber 4g	16%
Sugars 1g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A	10%
Vitamin C	8%
Calcium	20%
Iron	45%
* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily value may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.	
	Calories: 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
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% Daily Value*	
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Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	

Figure 1. Food label

To help keep your iron level healthy, you should eat foods that are high in iron. You can see how much iron a food has by checking the Nutrition Facts food label (see Figure 1). On food labels, the amount of iron is listed as a percent (%) of the daily value. The daily value for iron is 18 mg.

- If the food has 5% or less of the daily value, it is a poor source of iron.
- If the food has 10% to 19% of the daily value, it is a good source of iron.
- If the food has 20% or more of the daily value, it is high in iron.

To calculate exactly how much iron a food has, multiply the

daily value for iron (18 mg) by the % daily value in 1 serving of the food. For example, if a food label says it provides 50% of the daily value for iron, then multiply 18 mg by 50%. One serving of that food contains 9 mg of iron.

The daily value for iron is only a guideline. You may need more or less iron than the daily value. Use the chart above and talk with your healthcare provider to know how much iron you should be getting each day.

Helping Your Body Absorb Iron

Iron from animal sources, called heme iron, is easiest for your body to absorb. Iron from nonanimal foods, called nonheme iron, is harder for your body to absorb.

You can help your body absorb more iron by doing the following:

- Eat foods or supplements that have iron and foods that are high in vitamin C during the same meal. Examples of foods high in vitamin C include oranges, other citrus fruits, tomatoes, broccoli, and strawberries.
- Eat both animal and nonanimal sources of iron.
- Use a cast iron pan to cook foods high in iron.
- If your healthcare provider prescribes iron supplements, ask if you should take 2 or 3 small doses instead of 1 larger dose. Your body will absorb more of the iron if you take it in smaller doses that are spread out over the day.

Some things make it harder for your body to absorb iron. Follow the guidelines below.

- If you drink coffee or tea, drink it between your meals, not with them. This includes all types of coffee and tea, including regular and decaf coffee and black and green tea.
- Don't eat more than 30 grams of fiber a day.
- Don't eat foods high in calcium (such as dairy products or calcium-fortified juices) at the same time as foods high in iron

Choosing Foods With Iron

Animal Sources of Iron	
Source	Amount of Iron
Beef, variety meats & byproducts, spleen, 3 ounces	33.5 mg
Chicken liver, 3 ounces	11.6 mg
Cuttlefish, 3 ounces	9.2 mg
Oysters, 3 ounces	7.8 mg
Mussels, 3 ounce	5.7 mg
Liverwurst spread, 1/4 cup	4.9 mg
Queen crab, 3 ounces	2.5 mg
Clams, 3 ounces	2.4 mg
Beef chuck, 3 ounces	2.4 mg
Beef (ground), 3 ounces	2.3 mg
Lamb, 3 ounces	1.5 mg

Canned anchovy, 1 ounce	1.3 mg
Chicken, 3 ounces	0.9 mg
Turkey drumstick, 3 ounces	0.9 mg
Pork, 3 ounces	0.8 mg
Egg, 1 large	0.8 mg
Salmon, 3 ounces	0.6 mg
Scallops, 3 ounces	0.5 mg
Turkey breast, 3 ounce	0.5 mg
Shrimp, 3 ounces	0.3 mg

Nonanimal Sources of Iron

Source	Amount of Iron
Total [®] , 3/4 cup	18 mg
Grapenuts [®] , 1/2 cup	16.2 mg
Multigrain Cheerios [®] , 3/4 cup	6.1 mg
Cream of Wheat [®] , 1/2 cup	6 mg
Sesame seeds, 1/4 cup	5.2 mg
Fiber One [®] , 1/2 cup	4.5 mg
Raisin spice oatmeal, 3/4 cup	4 mg
Dried apricots, 1/2 cup	3.8 mg
Wheat germ, 1/2 cup	3.6 mg
Lima beans, 1/2 cup	2.9 mg
Mixed nuts, 1/2 cup	2.5 mg
Kidney beans, 1/2 cup	2.5 mg
Sunflower seeds, 1/2 cup	2.4 mg

Walnuts, 1/2 cup	2.0 mg
Cooked spinach, 1/2 cup	1.9 mg
Dark chocolate, 60-69%, 1 ounce	1.8 mg
Black beans, 1/2 cup	1.8 mg
Raisins, 1/2 cup	1.5 mg
Dried figs, 1/2 cup	1.5 mg
Chick peas, 1/2 cup	1.4 mg
Wheat bread, 1 slice	1 mg
Molasses, 1 tablespoon	1 mg

Speak With a Dietitian

If you have any questions or concerns about your diet while you're in the hospital, ask to see a dietitian. If you have already been discharged from the hospital and have questions about your diet, call 212-639-7312 to make an appointment with a dietitian.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Iron in Your Diet - Last updated on July 2, 2018
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